Aloha and Ambiguity: Social Work with Children in Hawaii

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ABSTRACT: Hawaii's children grow up in a rich and multifaceted environment which shapes their growth in unique ways. Strong influences from Japanese, Hawaiian, Filipino, Chinese, Korean and Samoan cultures join with a variety of European ethnic groups to enrich the cultural climate of Hawaii. Intermarriage is common and cultural diversity the norm. A strong military presence and a transient tourist population both represent jobs for many residents and influence the philosophy and behavior of the people. A high cost of living forces most families to have at least two wage earners in order to survive. Social work in Hawaii must recognize the usual stresses which all families face as well as some that are unique to this island state. The need to see life through the eyes of another is one of the basic social work values which presents a real challenge for social workers with the children and families of Hawaii.

Introduction

Hawaii's children develop in an ethnic and cultural melting pot, speaking pidgin English and making their way through a variety of cultural traditions and rituals that characterize the islands. A strong military presence as well as a transient tourist population, both of which represent jobs for many residents, influence the philosophy and behavior of the people. Families struggle with a very high cost of living, flounder because of the more than expected numbers of working mothers, and cope with the usual problems of fragmented families, crime, drugs and physical abuse.

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Cultural Diversity

Of the 956,000 people in Hawaii in 1982, the largest ethnic groups were: Caucasian, 25.5 percent; Japanese, 22.3 percent; part Hawaiian, 18.3 percent; Filipino, 11.8 percent; non-Hawaiian mixed, 10.5 (Oyama, Nishi, & Schmitt, 1984). The remaining 11.6 percent include: Chinese, Korean, Samoan, pure Hawaiian, Black, Puerto Rican and a number of other cultural groups mostly from Asia and the Pacific. A significant fraction of the Caucasian population, 24.7 percent, consist of members of the armed forces and their dependents. If these were excluded, the Japanese become the largest single group, 24.6 percent, followed by Caucasians, 21.4 percent and part Hawaiians, 20 percent.

With so much ethnic diversity in the population, people from different backgrounds are forced to interact frequently, causing the lowering of cultural barriers. Intermarriage is more and more common, much to the concern of many in the older generations. Although familiarity and necessity help to facilitate aloha (love), differences in deeply held beliefs about the world and how it operates contribute to conflict and tension. Intercultural marriage carries with it increased risk for conflict as different beliefs about child rearing come to the fore.

Kawika, a 10 year old boy of Chinese-Hawaiian ancestry leaves the house to get away from parental fighting. His part-Hawaiian dad spends most of his free time “talking story” with neighbors, while his Chinese mom tries to get him to make more lauhala hats to sell at the flea market. Mom is also angry at Kawika for wanting to play football rather than play piano and spend extra time on his studies. She blames dad and his lazy Hawaiian ways for the trouble. Dad in turn calls mom a strict Pake. Differences in priorities arising from differences in basic values are common in ethnically mixed marriages.

Cheryl, a mature fourteen year old American of Japanese ancestry, has never been sailing. She considers her annual outing to the beach with friends a great excursion. Rather than valuing the land and the sea, as do many families with strong Polynesian influence, Cheryl’s family has worked hard and denied themselves to send her to private high school. They also plan for her to go on to college. The family lives in a rural part of Oahu and raises pigs. Both parents also work in the pineapple cannery. Although neither parent speaks much English, two older siblings are in college on the mainland.

Ricardo, a fifteen-year-old recent immigrant from the Philippines, is bewildered and angry when his new classmates make fun of him for his flashy and bright colored clothes. He turns to other newly arrived adolescents and joins the gang for protection and a sense of acceptance. His parents were embarrassed and disgraced when the school complained about Ricardo’s many fights and aggressive behavior. They thought they had taught their son to be peaceful and to respect rules.